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No chair throwing

Top state jazzmen Tim Froncek, Vincent Bowens spend a swinging week at MSU

by Lawrence Cosentino



A lot of people have gotten their idea of what goes on in a jazz class from that chair-throwing jerk of an instructor, Terry Fletcher, in the Oscar-nominated film "Whiplash."

The two latest guest artists at MSU's Jazz Studies program, drummer Tim Froncek and saxophonist Vincent Bowens, are cut from finer cloth.

"I don't discourage any player," Bowens said. "Everybody has something to say."

Froncek and Bowens, two of the state's top jazz musicians, will work with MSU students all week, tour with them to several schools around the state and cap the week with a concert Friday.

Their joint residency marks the kickoff of a new Michigan Icons series at MSU and a geographical pincer movement by Rodney Whitaker, director of jazz studies. Bowens is a respected veteran of the Detroit scene; Muskegon-born Froncek is a

staple of the West Coast school (think of Traverse City, not San Francisco) and a jazz instructor at Grand Valley State University.

Both musicians belie the popular image of controlling tyrants like the fictional Fletcher.

"Music is a spirit," Bowens said. "Feeling and spirit. If you stifle it by trying to control it, you don't get the true essence of the person you're dealing with."

"I try not to control the music, but to fit in," Froncek said. "I might have to lead sometimes. But you have to know when not to be forceful."

Froncek tells his students that drummers have to be ready for anything, including reading minds. Bandleader Hank Levy once told Froncek to play a beat "like a three-legged dog" at a nerve-wracking 1990s gig. (Levy was a specialist in odd meters who composed off-kilter charts for jazz legends like Stan Kenton and Don Ellis.)

"Sometimes people don't know how to write it out, or even explain it," Froncek said. "You have to learn to interpret for people who don't know any musical terms."

More than 30 years ago, at Detroit's fabled jazz hothouse, Metro Arts Complex, Bowens enjoyed the kind of mentorship he'll provide at MSU this week.

One of Bowens' favorite memories was meeting dynamic drummer Roy Brooks in 1972, when Brooks was playing with jazz icon Charles Mingus. Brooks even brought Mingus to sit in with the students at the complex.

"It was a beautiful thing," Bowens said. "You're looking at jazz royalty. Herbie [Hancock], Freddie [Hubbard], whoever was in town would come in and play with us."

It sounds like a lot of pressure for a young student, but Bowens basked in the generosity and patience of the elders and passes it forward whenever he can.

"The way I was taught is, everything you try is good," he said. "I wouldn't try to discourage any way or form."

While still a youngster, Bowens fell in love with saxophonist Coleman Hawkins' classic recording of "Body and Soul."

"Once you heard Coleman, the saxophone was it," he said.

Froncek got the bug when he saw Ringo Starr flipping his sticks (and hair) with the Beatles on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

He skipped career day in high school. "I never thought of doing anything else, ever," he said. "I just knew I was going to play the drums."

Soon after, he fell in love with the big band sound of Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Energetic drummers Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich (a notorious jazz jerk) got him hooked on the physicality and coordination the drum kit demands. "It involves the whole body," Froncek said. "You're totally into it, and if you're doing it right, the audience won't sit still either."

Being a big fish in the small town of Muskegon helped Froncek. When the Miss Michigan pageant, the circus or some other show came to town, he was the go-to drummer. His big break was a steady gig with Woody Herman's big band (the fabled Thundering Herd) in 1982.

How do you impress Woody Herman when you're fresh out of high school? The answer will not be lost on MSU students this week.

"By being a professional, showing up and doing the best I can — that impressed him," Froncek said. Bowens and Froncek visited MSU last week for a quick introduction to the students. Bowens has fond memories of whisking 20-year-old Whitaker along on a tour of Mexico with Detroit pianist Kenn Cox in the late 1980s.

"We played real good," Bowens said. "We went all over Mexico. It was a real nice situation."

A week-long residency and tour is the ideal way to make a difference with students, Froncek said.

"Playing with them is where the learning takes place," Froncek said. "I can give them a lecture all day. When you're out on the road, you see how they react to the audience and to the other musicians."

Bowens was amazed at what he heard at MSU.

"Man, those guys are playing," he said. That's good news for a humble teacher who thinks of learning as a two-way street.

"I'm going to learn from them, definitely," he said. "I'm still learning all the time. Nobody knows it all."

MSU Jazz Octets with guest artists

Vincent Bowens, saxophone; and Tim Froncek, drums 8 p.m. Friday, Feb. 20 \$10/\$8 seniors/FREE for students Cook Recital Hall Music Building 333 W. Circle Drive, East Lansing (517) 353-5340, music.msu.edu

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